

Thoughtful Questions – Book 5

Chapter 45

Vivien is plagued by guilt over her break-up with Tim. What is the source of this guilt? Is it entirely justified? - - *Have we ever felt guilty because we have not been able to make ourselves feel something we think we should feel? Is it our fault when our hearts refuse to do our bidding?*

Age and loneliness push Vivien towards nostalgia, a weakness that she had previously been resistant to. Does it show only a weakening, or also a maturing in her that this is so? Vivien also finds her own unique path back to spirituality. - - *How have we evolved as we have grown older? In what ways has life beaten us down and made us more empathetic, and perhaps also more open to spirituality?*

In an ironic twist, Gregory the dreamer and nostalgist manages to throw away his blanket once it rips, but Vivien the practical woman cannot bring herself entirely to throw away her blouse and so she justifies it to herself by keeping it as a rag. - - *Are there times when we also justify our emotion-driven decisions and convince ourselves that we are doing them in order to be practical? How can we better call ourselves out on these inconsistencies?*

Fate hands Vivien an opportunity that she herself would never have otherwise pursued – namely the presidency of the garden club. She has no way of knowing that Gregory's return into her life hinges on her accepting this opportunity. Like the street accident that once brought them together, is this new accident of fate really a fluke? - - *What doorways have opened for us in our own lives that we thought at the time we had a choice about, but that we later realized we had to take in order to become who we were really meant to be?*

Vivien's fear of seeing Gregory again – even if it means sacrificing her last potential happiness with any romantic partner – is directly tied to her lack of self-confidence as an aging woman. Is it all in her head? How might it be more difficult for a woman to age than it would be for a man? - - *Do we still have unrealistic expectations for women, and is beauty still a larger part of their perceived value than it is for men? Is that fair? Has it gotten better since the 1960's? What can we individually do to make the world less inequitable in this regard?*

Chapter 46

Gregory and Vivien have now switched places, from looking like an older man with a younger woman, to looking like an older woman with a younger man. How is Vivien even more hurt by this than Gregory was? - - *There is still a greater bias against an older woman with a younger man than there is against an older man with a younger woman. How is that fair? Do we feel this bias in ourselves? If we know that it is unfair, what can we do to fight against it?*

Because of the seeming difference in that their ages, Vivien is very worried about what people think about her relationship with Gregory. Gregory now gets the opportunity to reply what Ferdinand once told him, that the opinion of other people shouldn't really matter. How long did it take Gregory to come to this same understanding? - - *How well do we apply this lesson in our own lives? Have we really given*

up our concern for the opinion of others in all areas, or are there hold-outs where we still dread others' judgment?

Gregory discovers that his friends cannot understand his spiritual journey, and that he really cannot talk to anyone about it. How does Gregory handle this discovery? Is he disappointed? - - *Does progress invariably isolate us? What is the isolation for? Is it part of the progress itself?*

The curiosity, eagerness, and humorous lack of familiarity that Gregory has with Vivien's world show someone opening his heart and mind to new experiences because of love. Can this really be the same man who was such a stuck-in-the-mud in the Florida retirement community? Would Gregory have gone to a grocery store for anyone else? - - *In what moments in our own lives have we felt the greater courage and curiosity to open ourselves up to new experiences? Was love for another person involved? Why aren't we like that more of the time? What would our lives be like if we were?*

Vivien finds it difficult to open up and to speak about her life after so many years of silence. What is it inside of her that has become blocked up or broken? What could she have done to prevent it from happening? - - *Are we ourselves also perhaps clogged up and silent in a way that we were not when we were younger? How might such silence protect us emotionally? At the same time, how does it impoverish us and limit what we are able to get out of life?*

Gregory does many small things to adapt himself to Vivien's world and to make her more comfortable, from sitting in a specific chair to adjusting the length of his stride to updating his wardrobe. Are these examples of his immature striving to please, or are these examples of his heightened sense of intuition and his desire to express his love for her? - - *How sensitive are we to the desires of other people? How good are we at identifying and acting upon even the smallest opportunities to make a stronger connection with a specific other person? Would it not be a great gift to have, to be so attuned to another? How can we foster this talent and get better at it?*

Gregory throws out Vivien's television. What reason does he give, and is his argument persuasive? - - *Does our own use of devices take us from our loved ones, and what can we do about it?*

Gregory has interesting thoughts on the unique burden and perhaps purpose of artistic, sensitive, emotional people. Is he pointing out their potential contributions so enthusiastically only because he sees himself as one of them? - - *Should we look at these sensitivities and sadness as ailments only, or is there indeed a hidden beauty and value there that society should help those people to harness? Do we ourselves have some of these traits? Do we view them as ailments or as opportunities or gifts? How would the changing our perspective change what we think we are able to accomplish?*

Gregory mentions that in order to truly change, a person must be entirely and fiercely committed. What force did Gregory harness to commit himself to changing his life outlook after so many decades of living? - - *Have we ourselves try to make changes in the past, only to fail? What is the strongest peg that we have in our lives on to which we could hang a new dream or a goal for change?*

Gregory tells Vivien about Atah. One of Gregory's key characteristics is his immaturity, in contrast with Atah, a much shorter-lived but wiser man. - - *In what ways are we still in mature? Will life events mature us, or can we decide to mature ourselves?*

One of the things that has never troubled Gregory is the false lure of success and money to solve all problems. Does Vivien fall into this trap? - - *In our own lives, have we fallen into the trap of thinking that more financial security or more success will solve our aches and troubles? What can we do to wear ourselves off of putting too much importance on the money?*

Gregory says that he does not care to have influence in the world but just to pull away into the safe haven of his intimate world with Vivien. Is that a selfish desire only, or is it also an elevated way to view the world? - - *Can we feel in ourselves an inborn desire for the delicate, passionate world, and how do we act on this impulse? To what is it impelling us? What is it for?*

Gregory and Vivien both realize that their relationship will be imperfect and will have some big compromises in it. How has Gregory changed to be able to see beyond these compromises to the greater blessing that they both enjoy together? - - *Can we teach ourselves to also shift our attention from the missing things to the blessings? What can we change in our perceptions to make it easier for this shift in thinking to occur?*

Gregory explains to Vivien how he feels about the importance of words. What does Vivien do to show that she is ready to accommodate his views? How does Gregory appreciate and feel her consideration of his preferences? - - *How, through a thousand small ways, can we adjust ourselves to the preferences and hearts of others, and is that not what terms like "family" and "marriage" inherently imply?*

A part of Vivien worries that they have rushed into things too quickly with Gregory. Is this prudence and caution, or is this fear and an unwillingness to take a risk? - - *When is it the right time to hold back and evaluate our options, and when is it the time to go for it? When life puts us at that crossroads, will we be able to know the difference?*

Chapter 47

Gregory goes from thinking that having Vivien will solve his problems and bring him happiness, to thinking that he will begin to work on his problems if only he could get Vivien the first, to realizing that he will have to find happiness on his own and make progress on himself regardless of whether he gets Vivien or not. How did this last realization finally make him capable of being ready for Vivien's return into his life? - - *Are we still waiting for someone or something else to bring happiness into our lives? What will it take for us to stop waiting and to make efforts to bring happiness to ourselves?*

At first, Gregory misses Vivien because he thinks he is not there. Then, he misses her although she clearly is there. How are both situations like two sides of the same coin? How do they make it clear that what he is missing is not truly her physical proximity? - - *Do we believe in our own lives that when we feel parted from someone, that it is not really The Truth? Can we also perhaps come to believe Atah's teaching in this regard?*

For Vivien, having Gregory move in with her reminds her a bit of being caregiver to a smaller child. So much of her attention and time has to be diverted to him. What does this say about Gregory? And what does it say about Vivien, that she is willing to invest in their relationship to this extent? - - *How much time do we spend taking care of those around us? Is it always with an entirely giving and un-bitter heart?*

Inevitably, living with another person brings out their flaws to where they can be seen. How does Gregory's spoiled-child past and his poor memory cause him to slip up in his new life with Vivien? How does Vivien handle it when he makes mistakes? - - *How do we handle the errors and shortcomings of those we live with? Can we become more gracious about others' shortcomings, as we would want them to be about ours?*

In one sense, Gregory and Vivien are like one person living alone in Vivien's house. Vivien's neighbors see only her, she buys groceries for one, and so forth. And for Gregory, for a part of each 24 hours he has to give up Vivien's presence so that she can sleep. How does the fact that Vivien and Gregory share a single wedding band suggest a kind of spiritual marriage, perhaps such as nuns have with Christ? - - *Is it possible for anyone to embark upon a spiritual marriage with an unseen beloved? What would it require of us to do so? Must we first give up our other loves in this world, or can it be a special spiritual layer that gets added on top of our worldly relationships?*

Vivien is eager to avoid telling Sophie about Gregory's return, and she puts it off for as long as possible. - - *When are we too cowardly to face up to things that need to be faced? How does our reluctance often just make things worse?*

Physical desire is a barrier between Gregory and Vivien throughout their relationship. How does the way that they deal with it evolve and change over time? - - *In what way might physical desire be a barrier for any mortal person when trying to come into a closer relationship with the spiritual world? How much do we have to struggle with it in order to come to terms with the limits of our nature? Why do we have to give in sometimes in order to make progress?*

Gregory finally is flexible enough to attempt living without perpetually being wrapped in the virtual comfort blanket of his dark suit. What has changed in him to make this possible? - - *What seemingly small comfort zone challenge might we take on in the next six months, to give our own flexibility something to practice on?*

Vivien finally admits that she gave up Gregory in order to be with Chip so that she could achieve her worldly ambitions rather than listen to her inner spiritual voice. How many years did it take her to come to this realization? - - *How many years has it taken us to see where we sold out and gave up our higher dreams? What can we still pick back up now and not lose all chance to make progress on?*

Vivien has waited all this time to finally have the life she always dreamed of with the man of her heart, but ironically now she finds herself too busy and too overworked to fully enjoy it. Why does she think she has to keep working all the time? - - *When have we been too busy to really stop and live in love with our own angel? Are we not also overdoing it with worldly ambitions and denying ourselves fuller calm and happiness when it could be ours?*

Vivien, looking at Gregory naked in the river in Alaska, sees the combined animal and man nature that he has. In fact, as Gregory points out, everyone has this dual nature. - - *How easy is it for us to see this truth in our daily lives, rather than only under unusual circumstances like this? How do we balance these two sides of our own nature?*

Vivien is very embarrassed by Gregory's appearance in her world, from Sophie's look-alike husband seeing his doppelgänger, to Tim meeting Vivien's new lover, to Sara Linda assuming that Vivien is enjoying the physical attentions of a much younger man. - - *When are the times when we have been*

embarrassed in our own social circle when presenting a person or a hobby or interest that has captured our hearts? Is it not always somewhat vulnerable when we show our loves to others?

When Gregory tastes Vivien's blood in the garden, a connection is forged between them that takes them deeper into each other than they have ever been before. This connection has been there all along, but now it has become palpable. - - *Have there been times in our own lives when we have unexpectedly discovered the depth and strength of a connection with someone else? Doesn't it seem magical when this happens?*

Vivien finds it very empowering to be suddenly aware of exactly how her desire with Gregory works. Gregory meanwhile feels guilty and afraid. How does Vivien work to make him more comfortable with the changes in their relationship? How do they enrich their relationship? - - *What kinds of emotional discoveries could help us deepen our own relationships? Under what circumstances might we be able to make these discoveries?*

Chapter 48

In a slightly ironical twist, Gregory has finally relaxed in his frenzied life outlook while Vivien is pushing him to do more with his time. Is she right or wrong to do so? - - *In our own lives, where is the balance between inner calm and outward active living in the world? Do we give up this world in order to see into the next? Or do we lose ourselves completely in this one so that all our calm is lost?*

At night Gregory loses Vivien – to sleep. How is this a foreshadowing of the greater loss he will have to face eventually? Might his situation perhaps be akin in some ways to having dream lover or a fantasy that we can conjure up for ourselves at night, but then have to lose to reality each day? - - *What if we never slept? How does sleep bless us? How might it prepare us for eventually letting go?*

As Gregory ponders his frightening, incandescent experience with Vivien in the garden, he sees clearly that his deepest physical desire ends only in her destruction. - - *Does God desire us and ultimately take us in the same way, in a destructive embrace after which nothing is left of us but our hollow husk?*

“Many people are stuck at a similar point, so close already to their miracle,” Gregory says of Edgar Allan Poe. - - *Might something similar be true of each of us? Is it not a consoling thought, to know that we could be closer to our goal than we realize?*

When Gregory and Vivien celebrate Christmas together, it is both a chance to reveal their own likes as well as to demonstrate familiarity with what they know the other would enjoy. - - *What are the elements of a great gift? Is its inspiration likely to come at a pre-scheduled date on a repeating annual calendar or is it, like inspiration, more rare? How do the holiday times set up unrealistic expectations in us regarding gifts for ourselves and for others? Is gifting the problem, or are we doing it wrong? What would Atah give as gifts for Christmas, if he celebrated it?*

Wolf's visit precipitates anxious preparations of immense proportions. Why does Vivien feel the need to be so over-the-top in her hosting? How does her perception of Gregory and his friends make her insecure, and how does that add to the foment before the guests' arrival? - - *When do we overdo it and try to outdo ourselves in the eyes of others? What drives our ostentatious hosting? What do our guests really want to enjoy with us? How can we get more comfortable with ourselves and with hosting others?*

Gregory, Vivien, and John Mackey come to the conclusion that there is no coincidence in this life, no “accidents”. Is there any way that this could be true while preserving free will? - - *What coincidences have happened in our own lives that seem, on second thought, to have had a deeper significance and meaning, so that we cannot imagine our lives having taken any other turn?*

Gregory shares Adelaïse’s proposal to make Vivien unchanging, but Vivien turns it down. Why does she decline it? What does she fear even more than death? Would she have said yes when she was younger? If yes, why? Because she was more beautiful then, or because she was less wise? - - *What would we do if we were offered to be made unchanging and to live like a Gregory and his friends? Would it depend on who made us the offer, or who we would get to live with afterwards? Would we do it for ambition? For Love? Out of fear of death?*

Vivien’s cautious liquid gift of herself to Gregory is presented sensually from his point of view, but how about from the view of the giver? Is it an extreme gift? As a woman who has given her body and blood in childbirth already, how might giving up her blood for Gregory now seem like a natural part of deepest love? - - *What are the corollaries with the love of Christ that the Church teaches about? How far does love go in giving of itself for others?*

Gregory’s discussion of longings explicitly draws the parallel between lust and soul-searching. It is a key theme of the entire novel. Can a longing for something be proof of its missing piece, as Gregory suggests? - - *How do we think spiritual matters work? Do we only see the spiritual impulse as a desire to explain the things we do not know, to make more understandable to our primitive minds a creation that is more complex than we can comprehend? Or is there truly a desire for deeper meaning of existence that fuels our ongoing search for the divine?*

Despite Gregory’s frequent philosophical ramblings, Vivien asks one of the most profound questions in the entire book: is the purpose of our lives to seek to see beyond this life into spiritual things, or is the purpose to settle down to our animal reality? How has this question played out over the ages around the world, and in different strata of society? To blend these disparate elements, often entirely separate jobs have arisen to focus on spiritual work, while the rest of the people get on with daily animal living – a sort of spiritual division of labor. How does this make sense, and how might it not? - - *Within each of us individually, how do different phases of our lives better suit animal life versus wisdom and spiritual progress? Where is our own current balance between these two? Do we have in ourselves – and do we feel – the higher longing that Gregory speaks of?*

Gregory fears that, in his love for Vivien, he is once more losing his sense of balance. - - *In what sense does love go counter to the maturity of emotional independence and wisdom? But on the other hand, how does love raise up our maturity and give us even greater wisdom? Is it the same love in both instances, or are they different things? Might they be different but perhaps the nuances are too subtle for us as animal creatures to understand?*

Chapter 49

Vivien discovers the bittersweetness of life, despite finally getting her much-longed-for happiness with Gregory. She admits that to try to lose the sad parts of life, for example Gregory’s depression, would be to lose the great parts as well. There is no way to separate them. “To cure him would be to lose him.”

What now makes her wise enough to except the imperfections of life? -- *How has life shown us its bittersweetness? Can we stop ourselves from wishing it were otherwise? Can we work within ourselves on greater acceptance?*

Frank Sinatra appears repeatedly as a sort of a recurring landscape marker showing the passage of time in 20th-Century America. Who or what are some of the other milestone markers of this era? -- *How does our own view of the 20th Century change with the further passage of time? Does it dull or sharpen or both? What are some of the key historic milestone markers of our own lifetimes?*

Gregory describes alcohol as a solace to help bridge the gap between the realities of the mortal world and one's "fairy expectations". How does this contrast with Vivien's acceptance of life as it is – bittersweet? -- *Have we ourselves ever experienced the solace of drink, of drugs, of music or novels or art, or other internal experiences? How do we protect ourselves against the dangers of these pseudo-solaces and better come to accept the world as it is?*

Vivien knows that their love is temporary because she will pass while Gregory will go on. How difficult is that for her to have to accept, but how necessary in order for them to enjoy their years of happiness together? -- *As mortals perhaps in a love relationship with the Divine, we also know it will be temporary because we will pass but God presumably will go on. How much more difficult does this make our attempts to have a relationship with such an Entity who – if He or She exists – on top of it is also invisible and infinitely more complex than our minds can comprehend?*

Gregory is the lover who has been with Vivien for as long as she has been able to connect with a friend/lover on any real, meaningful level. -- *God may just be the lover who has been within our hearts every day since our childhood onward, for as long as we can remember. Can we, in meditation, find this constant support and companionship that is within us – either as part of our own nature or from a seemingly external source like God?*

Gregory's views on the enlightenment and wisdom of women are very much at odds with his time period. How were the views of his day biased against women, and what cost did that bring upon society as a result? -- *Today, women are better off in many ways, but in many situations women still have to act like men in order to be seen as worthy of respect. How truly enlightened are we then, if this is the case? When will men courageously take up some of the best feminine characteristics and not feel any shame or criticism for it? Are there no softer, more refined feminine traits that are worth admiring and emulating? Does not every spiritually progressive man show some of these more lofty feminine characteristics? Would the expansion of these characteristics not make the world a better place?*

Gregory speaks of the physical care of other creatures, of caregiving as investing an infinite amount of open-hearted attention to another living being. How does he live up to this in his life with Vivien? -- *How good are we at caregiving? What could we do to grow our aptitude for it? What would we need to do with our own needs so that we could move beyond them to focus ourselves more on someone else's?*

When Vivien pushes Gregory away in order to grow his independence, he is shocked and hurt. How much inner strength and courage must it take for Vivien to stick determinedly to this course of action? -- *Have there been times when it has broken our heart to have to let someone go – a lover or a growing child perhaps? How can this separation be done as an act of the greatest love?*

Chapter 50

Time does not stop for Gregory and Vivien but rushes ever onward. How does their relationship evolve over the years? Where have each of them shown greater growth and maturity? - - *What has been our own experience with the passage of time as we have gotten older? Where do we still need to grow and mature? Can we see how our learning and self-betterment is tied up with the chronological narrative of our mortal life?*

Nadine and Frank's wedding anniversary shows a very different couple 60 years later than they were when they were young folks on their first date. How has their marriage lived up to a realistic ideal? How has it been different from Gregory and Vivien's relationship? - - *In relationships where we have lived for a long time with another, how have we changed how and has the other person changed? In what ways is a very long, stable relationship a real accomplishment?*

Chapter 51

Hurricane Katrina opens Gregory's eyes to the suffering of others. Has living with intense internal focus and then with so much investment into his life with Vivien made Gregory more oblivious to the wider suffering in the world? What has he gained in its place? But ultimately, will he not have to shift his focus to be more outward, praying for the entire world, if he is to find true holiness and wisdom? - - *How do we balance focus on our own life concerns against those of the broader world? Does merely following the news make us more or less compassionate? How can we grow our compassion?*

Inviting all of Vivien's neighbors, friends, and customers to a celebration in her honor allows Gregory to see a different side of Vivien – how she has been not only his but also has meant something to many other people. - - *How does seeing our loved ones in other aspects of their lives enrich our appreciation of them? How might it help us to see them differently?*

Sophie has lived a life embittered by unrequited love. It is an example of the danger of lack that Atah told Gregory about. How might her life have been different if she had been able to get beyond it? - - *Have we also been burdened by lack, whether in the form of failed loves, failed ambitions, or broken dreams? What has it cost us? Is it too late to try to let go now?*

Coming full circle, Vivien returns to the hospital. How is Vivien the dependent old lady similar to Vivien the dependent small girl? - - *How will age teach all of us the loss of independence once more? With what humility and grace shall we be able to bear it? How will we be able to bear watching it happen to others we love?*

Gregory complains that other people judge him and mistakenly think they know what it is that he wants from them. He is often described in quite feminine terms, including his stupendous physical beauty. He has often had to suffer over his looks in a way that many women would well understand. - - *Do others sometimes misjudge us and what we truly want? How does it feel to be unfairly judged? Why do we then do it to others?*

Vivien asks Gregory to take the role of the ferryman at the River Styx and help her across, to the Afterlife. -- *Would we also wish we had someone to help us out when we have had enough of this life? How is it that as a society we are so incapable of offering more end-of-life options? Where does morality and the rights of the living properly fall in these complex issues?*

Gregory and Vivien's love ends with a passionate act of destruction. -- *How is this akin to the way that God takes us mortals out of the world? To get closer, we have to break who we are. Is God a destructive lover? Do we, literally dying for His love, willingly give ourselves over for destruction just so that we can be closer to our own Beloved? Is this powerful or just infinitely sad?*

As part of his saying good-bye to Vivien, Gregory gets a glimpse of the Afterlife. -- *Is there really such a thing? What do we think it will be like? Why can't we know the truth about the Afterlife now, in this life? How might knowing beforehand weaken our mortal experience? Is it possible to fail in this universe and to not move on anywhere, or will everyone eventually have to move on? Which souls does the Divine agree to throw away?*

After Vivien's death, Gregory temporarily takes on a saint's glow. What is this glow? Is it a real phenomenon, and why is it so often represented in Western religious art if it is not real? -- *Do we see the saint's halo as the unusual iridescence of perhaps an extraterrestrial being, or is it more of an idea than a real light? Might the word "enlightened" capture both of these ideas?*

Chapter 52

Wolf compares Gregory's quest to that of the knights' quest for the Holy Grail. -- *In our lives, what is our Holy Grail?*

In Gregory's vision, Atah points out again how we must all live as both animal and God, constantly making trade-offs. How has Gregory struggled with this balance differently from Vivien? Who has had it easier, men or women? Men, in overcoming physical desires, or women, in overcoming material desires for beauty and comfort? In what ways are Vivien and Gregory counter to these stereotypes? -- *Which area do we think gives us the most challenge?*

In his meditations during his grief, Gregory re-focuses on his breathing exercises. As a non-breather, this artificial exercise is purely meditative for him. -- *What can meditative breathing yield us? Does it change our view of breathing when we think of it as a form of continuous conscious and subconscious prayer? Can there really be so much more to this simple physical act than it seems?*

Unsurprisingly, despite how much new wisdom he has managed to acquire, Gregory has to struggle to come to terms with Vivien's death. -- *How might being able to feel the presence of someone who has passed on be similar to trying to feel and be aware of the presence of the Divine? Have we tried to feel either of these? How difficult is it to achieve and to sustain such an awareness of unseen things?*

In the end, Gregory leaves on a spiritual quest. -- *Do we imagine that spiritual progress inevitably involves global travel, or is it more of a metaphor? To what spiritual quest are we called? How will it look when we get underway? Will there be an end destination?*